

Expansion, renovation project at Mizner-designed house in Palm Beach wins Ballinger Award

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NEWS

Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach's Ballinger Award honors the Morissuttis' renovation of their Mediterranean-style home at 89 Middle Road, designed by society architect Addison Mizner in 1921.

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Special to the Daily News



With a recently completed renovation and addition, the Addison Mizner-designed 1921 landmarked estate originally christened Audita has been named the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach's Robert I. Ballinger Award recipient for 2022.

An acknowledgment of architectural stewardship, the annual award recognizes a major renovation or restoration project that reflects the history and traditions of Palm Beach architecture, according to the Preservation Foundation. Established in 1987, the award is named after a former chairman of the town's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The award will be presented to the owners, Toronto snowbirds Larry and Caren Morassutti, who have renamed the house Villa Mora. The Morassuttis will share the award with their design team, headed by Coral Gables-based architect Rafael Portuondo. An awards presentation is planned for later this month, says Preservation Foundation President and CEO Amanda Skier.

The Morassuttis bought the Mediterranean-style oceanfront villa at 89 Middle Road in 2018 from Sir Peter Wood, who had, in turn, purchased it as part of a much larger estate once owned by the late communications billionaire John Kluge, who had used the villa as a guesthouse on his 4.3-acre property. Wood later demolished the other structures on the estate and sold several subdivided lots for redevelopment.

Facing the Atlantic across a large expanse of lawn, the former Audita comprised a main villa and a garage cottage when the Morassuttis bought the property.

The couple say they appreciated the historic architecture designed by Mizner. The society architect, whose 150th birthday was Dec. 12, forever changed the architectural character of Palm Beach with his 1918 Spanish-and-Italian-influenced design for the building that houses The Everglades Club on Worth Avenue as well as dozens of other structures, homes and mansions with Mediterranean-influenced architecture.



But the Morassuttis needed a larger home and turned to a design team that included Portuondo, a principal with Portuondo Perotti Architects; The Cury Group as contractor; Philip Chappelle Design for interior architectural features; and landscape architect Adam Mills. Caren Morassutti undertook the interior decoration herself.

The goal was to seamlessly integrate a new addition to the historic residence while maintaining the architectural character of Mizner's Mediterranean Revival style.

The estate also reflects the work of Marion Sims Wyeth, another first-generation Palm Beach architect, who designed subsequent renovations on the property.

The original villa and guesthouse had 5,541 square feet of living space, inside and out. Today, the estate offers six bedrooms in an 11,400-square-foot compound. The project took two years to complete with much of the work taking place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Palm Beach architectural award-winner is 'a study in restraint'

The estate "is a significant example of Mizner's early work," says Skier. "While many properties from this period received large additions designed by his contemporaries, this property stayed roughly the same size until 2019."

The addition is "a study in restraint," Skier adds. "At one story above grade, the addition provides the square footage required for modern living while respecting the hierarchy of Mizner's original design and Wyeth's entrance facade."

Keeping the addition in scale with the original residence was critical, says Larry Morassutti, who runs The Morassutti Group, a real estate consulting firm that also develops and invests in properties, the majority in Toronto.

"Our home was one of the smallest designed by Mizner. What we had to do was make it bigger for our family," he says. "We tried to create very much of a family home with a human scale."

"While rooms are generous in size, our home is not a McMansion or gargantuan with wings upon wings. We did not want it to appear ostentatious, but to feel comfortable with architecture that had integrity. We have views of the ocean from everywhere, and our home feels welcoming and nice to be in."

Wyeth's work also is well represented at the house, according to Preservation Foundation Director of Archives Marie Penny.

She notes that Wyeth, a principal of Wyeth, King and Johnson, designed the two-story garage cottage in 1923 for the house's first owners — stockbroker Alfred Kay and his civic-leader wife, Elizabeth. Wyeth then returned to make alterations to the estate in 1954, when it was owned by businessman and inventor William L. Hanley. At that time, the address changed from 582 S. Ocean Blvd. to 89 Middle Road.

"Mizner's east elevation, facing the ocean, features trefoil and Roman arch surrounds around the windows. Wyeth's west elevation features Ionic columns that flank the entrance," Penny says.

The two buildings were landmarked by the town in 1991. A report prepared at the time for the landmarks board showed that visitors approached the estate from the west, passed through the entrance courtyard by the garage cottage and then viewed Wyeth's "triumphal arch" entrance portal to the main villa. Double front doors opened into the main entrance hall, which led to a gallery with a den to the east. To the north was a stair hall, dining room and kitchen. To the south was a living room and loggia. Upstairs were the master bedroom and three guest bedrooms.

With the blessing of the landmarks board, the Morassuttis' design team removed a loggia on the south side of the house and a courtyard. Those areas accommodated a new great room and ocean-facing loggia adjacent to a new breakfast room and kitchen, which offers views of the front courtyard. The new loggia also captures vistas that include the seaside swimming pool, where a cabana doubles as a garden folly.

Portuondo also reworked parts of the original villa's layout. He designed a new library to occupy space that once housed the dining room, which was moved to a spot more centrally adjacent to the great room. In the area where the original kitchen was located are two guest bedrooms. Upstairs, the architect revamped the floorplan to better accommodate ocean views.

The guest cottage on the north side of the property also was renovated to help strengthen the sense of arrival into the property from the Middle Road cul-de-sac.

'You feel like you're living outside,' architect says

Ed Cury, the contractor, notes the fine materials in the house. Floors are covered in Spanish limestone and doors are mahogany. The new library features mahogany paneling and a limestone-clad fireplace from France, while the fireplace surround in the family room is hand-carved from Dominican shell stone.

"In the living room, the ceiling is all hand-done, lime-washed pecky cypress that we designed, and in the family room, the pitched ceiling was fabricated in Canada and brought down in sections," Cury says. "For the capitals and columns in the courtyard, we found the original molds that Mizner used; they were at Herpel Cast Stone" in West Palm Beach.

Portuondo points out that his revised layout fosters a visual connection from room to room, which makes the house feel more expansive and takes advantage of ocean and garden views to link the interiors to the exterior.

“You feel like you are living outside,” he says. “Also, the garden folly has the same column spacing as the new loggia, so you can see all the way to the ocean.

“And the breakfast room is (set into) a bay window. It looks across the yard to the front entry, and you are surrounded by gardens.

“Also interesting, the three sets of kitchen doors (opening on to the front courtyard) are on the center line of the portico entry of the front door, and the fountain is centered on that axis. There’s nothing nicer than having all the elevations align with one another in a garden room.”

‘It was a long journey,’ homeowner says

The project won the 2021 Institute of Classical Art & Architecture Florida Chapter’s Addison Mizner Award for best renovated home over 5,000 square feet.

The Ballinger Award is among five awards presented by the Preservation Foundation. The new Edward E. and Suzanne G. Elson Award honors historic public or commercial architecture; the Elizabeth L. and John H. Schuler Award honors new architecture with exemplary design that also complements Palm Beach's historical architecture; the Lesly S. Smith Landscape Award honors excellence in landscape design; and the Polly Earl Award honors restorations or rehabilitations of smaller-scale properties in Palm Beach neighborhoods.

The Morassuttis, as well as the members of their design team, say they are grateful the Preservation Foundation has recognized their work with a Ballinger Award.

“My wife and I felt tremendously honored and very proud to receive such a prestigious award,” Larry says. “It was a long journey, and during the journey, COVID hit.

“Many people who looked at the house (when it was for sale) thought the lot was beautiful but didn’t know what to do with the house. It took remarkable vision. We were concerned to make the addition look seamless. That’s the mark of a good renovation — you can’t tell the old from the new — and I think we achieved this.”

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